

## Saxton: DEP rules jeopardize beach fill

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— U.S. Rep. Jim Saxton had unusually stern words Friday for the state Department of Environmental Protection, accusing it of jeopardizing the Long Beach Island beach-replenishment project and urging it to loosen its requirements so the project can proceed.

"It has taken us more than a decade to get this far, working with Republican and Democrat administrations in both Trenton and Washington," Saxton, R-3rd, said in a statement. "Now I'm afraid N.J. DEP is adding such stringent requirements that it could put the project in jeopardy. I encourage DEP to work with the towns, not against them, to ensure reasonable public access and find ways to improve public access, not impose harsh conditions and financial hardships on LBI residents."

The DEP requires the six island towns to provide access points to the beach every quarter-mile — the federal requirement is every half-mile — and construct parking lots with restroom facilities. Saxton wrote in his letter to the DEP that the cost of the every-quarter-mile requirement would be "astronomical" for island taxpayers and could stop the project. The requirements are particularly troublesome in the North Beach and Loveladies sections of Long Beach Township, where large homes abound and public access is minimal.

Acting DEP Commissioner Lisa Jackson, however, said the DEP stands by its requirements.

"I certainly respect (Saxton's) position and intend to follow up with him," Jackson said. "But we remain committed to public access, especially when there's considerable public funding for those beaches."

The federal government is funding most of the ambitious project, which calls for the strengthening and cyclical replenishment of the storm-rattled barrier island's shoreline for 50 years. Most island residents agree that the beaches need help, but many, particularly beachfront homeowners, disagree with state prerequisites for the project.

Asked why the state can implement its restrictions when it is funding less than the federal government, Jackson said, "I pay federal taxes and I pay state taxes. It's public money and they're public beaches. ... Our position remains unchanged."

Only a very small fraction of beachfront landowners on the island have signed an

easement granting state and federal authorities access to their land to implement the project. One of them is Joe Barrett, a homeowner in Ship Bottom since 1973 who said he sympathizes with both sides in the dispute. But he said he fears funding for the project could be diverted to immediate emergencies — like Hurricane Katrina rebuilding efforts — if residents and authorities delay.

"There's two monsters that can get you: one out in the ocean and one in Trenton," Barrett said. "Today is a beautiful day. It's quiet, it's calm; but all you need is the right moons and you've got (the storm of) 1962 all over again, or a storm from down South with a name we'll never forget. Then everybody will ask where the help was."

Saxton spokesman Jeff Sagnip Hollendonner said the parking lots and restrooms, which the DEP and Army Corps of Engineers discussed briefly during public meetings in December, are new requirements. He also said the DEP suggested the quarter-mile access rule throughout the planning of the project, but never made it a requirement until recent months.

"It's one thing to say that it's a goal, but it's another thing to let it stall the project," Hollendonner said of the access points. Of the parking lots and bathrooms, he said, "Let's face it: it's a skinny barrier island. If they want to put parking lots in they're going to have to have space, and they need plumbing facilities. For a small town to absorb that kind of cost in their budget is a considerable hurdle."

Opposition from residents and local politicians to the state requirements has accelerated since a pair of highly contentious public meetings that state and federal authorities held with apprehensive island residents Dec. 13 in Brant Beach and Surf City.

Ship Bottom Mayor William Huelsenbeck last week accused the DEP of holding the island hostage. Mayor DiAnne Gove said Friday she is preparing a letter for whoever takes over as DEP commissioner in Gov. Jon Corzine's administration expressing the concerns of the township, which is the island's largest municipality. Authorities seek 600 of about 800 easements from beachfront landowners in the township.

"We still have differences," said Gove, who would not discuss details of the letter. "The DEP changes the rules every two seconds."

The initial cost of the project is estimated to be about \$71 million. The total cost estimate, including repair of the beaches every seven years for 50 years, is about \$118 million. The federal government is funding 65 percent. The DEP will pay three-quarters of the remaining 35 percent. The municipalities will cover the rest.

The project began last year with the dumping of 16 tons of sand along a short stretch of beach in Harvey Cedars. Officials plan to start the project in Surf City and Ship Bottom in the spring.